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The Obligatory Horrors: Translating Tadeusz Borowski's Holocaust Narratives into German and English

PETER DAVIES

This paper explores the English and German translations of Tadeusz Borowski's Holocaust narratives, suggesting that the translations raise questions about the status of literature and testimony in the different cultural contexts into which they are translated. It argues that consideration of translation should be central to any discussion of Holocaust writing, rather than being relegated to the margins.

What, if anything, can the study of translation tell us about the production and reception of literary autobiographical accounts of Holocaust experience, and about anxieties about the question of authenticity in these accounts? Tadeusz Borowski's story, *Lindzie, którzy szli* (literally, 'The People Who Were Walking'), published in 1946, is an account of day-to-day activities in Auschwitz before a backdrop of thousands of people arriving in trains and walking to their deaths. It contains a scene in which the narrator, Tadek, a non-Jewish Polish political detainee in a position of relative privilege in the hierarchy of prisoners, encounters a group of women prisoners who ask him and his companions for food. In the published English translation by Barbara Vedder (1967, hereafter referred to as Vedder), the women say:

'Listen, you can always manage somehow,' they would say, 'you've been in the camp a long time and you've survived. Surely you have all you

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need. Why won't you share it with us?'²¹ (Vedder, p.87)

A German translation from 1963 by Vera Cerny (hereafter Cerny) renders this as:

*'Ihr seid doch Männer,' sagten sie, 'Ihr könnt alles. Ihr lebt schon so lange im Lager und seid nicht gestorben. Bestimmt habt ihr alles. Warum wollt ihr nicht mit uns teilen?'*²² (Cerny, p.147)

and a more recent translation by Friedrich Griesse (hereafter Griesse) puts it like this:

*'Ihr seid doch Männer und könnt alles,' sagten sie. 'Ihr lebt schon so lange in diesem Lager und seid nicht gestorben. Ihr habt bestimmt alles. Warum wollt ihr nicht mit uns teilen?'*²³ (Griesse, p.79)

However, the Polish text, with my own word-for-word translation, reads as follows:

*Wy przecież jesteście mężczyźnami i możecie wszystko – mówili. – Tak długo żyjecie w tym obozie i nie umarliście. Na pewno macie wszystko. Dlaczego nie chcecie podzielić się z nami?'*²⁴ (p.81)

You are still men and can [do] anything – they said. – For so long you have lived in this camp and have not died. Certainly you have everything. Why do you not want to share with us?

The contrast between the versions is striking, not least for the way in which Vedder's English translation elides the difference between the men and the women, disguising Borowski's point, which is one of the key issues in the story, that the power hierarchies amongst the prisoners also involve clear distinctions between the status of men and women.²⁵ By fudging this point, the English translation seems to reflect a common anxiety about distinguishing between categories of victims of the Nazis, preferring to elide the difference in order to stress universality. By contrast, the way that the German versions set out the sentence seems to emphasise this point, drawing attention to it rather than treating it simply as a fact of life. The English version also uses the more emotive word 'survived', rather than the balder 'you have not died', a decision which identifies Tadek as a 'survivor', rather than, in this grimly ironic story, an exploiter of his situation.

This article will argue that such differences reflect translation strategies which can help to tell us something about the cultural, political and

philosophical status of the Holocaust in the literary cultures into which the stories are translated. Although one could doubtless discuss these translations in terms of accuracy or faithfulness, I think there are more interesting things to say here. In fact, I would argue that discussing whether one or other of these versions reflects the 'original' more truly, immediately and authentically could be severely misleading, since I find such terms loaded in significant ways. Instead, I will use the different translations of Borowski's work to argue that these translations – along with their paratextual apparatus – construct within a particular reception context an effect of authenticity. I do not mean by this that one should employ a theoretical language of deconstruction to question the truth-telling power of the text, but instead that these texts contribute to changing conceptions of what the authenticity of testimony actually means. The translations construct through their strategies an 'original' text which supports and authenticates these very strategies.

* * *

Research on the translation of literary autobiography in general is still limited, and that into the translation of Holocaust autobiographies is even more so. As Piotr Kuliwczak has pointed out, the philosophical treatment of questions of language in studies of Holocaust writing precludes concrete discussion of translation: discussing Dominic LaCapra's work on narratives of trauma, he writes, 'language is viewed [in studies of Holocaust testimony] as an abstract code, unrelated to any particular linguistic reality'.⁶ When applied to the reading of literary texts or testimonies, this code can then be discussed in the abstract, philosophical or literary-critical terms of a 'post-Holocaust crisis of signification or representation', which chimes in well with aspects of post-structuralist critical practice. Translation, as a concrete attempt to mediate between two defined linguistic systems, is not an issue in such studies; in fact, it would significantly disrupt some of the founding assumptions of such studies.

Alternatively, where the text is seen as an unimpeachably immediate and authentic account of experience – as a testimony – then the translator must be invisible, since to admit that one does not have immediate access to an authentic experience is morally problematic. Classic texts, such as those by Borowski, Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, have often been employed in the English-speaking world not as literary or autobiographical accounts, but as

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testimonial sources for historical evidence and for text-based moral and philosophical discussion. Since much of the theory of testimony in the English-speaking world has been built upon ideas of immediate, authentic transmission of experience in texts, to problematise the role of the translator would be effectively to suggest that no reader in English has the opportunity to encounter the original experience. This may, of course, be so, but it is the notion of the authentic original itself that is in question here, not the evaluation of translations as more or less imperfect renderings of a stable original text.

The role of the translator is therefore to render the original transparent, and his/her success in this is often authenticated in publication by contextualising essays, explanatory footnotes, and occasionally by the quotation of an approving letter to the translator from the author: a strategy which paradoxically makes visible the translator's invisibility.⁷ Translators sometimes opt for the strategy of leaving specific terms untranslated, either German administrative terms for which English equivalents are hard to find, or in order to stress the linguistic variety of the camps' populations, or to emphasise the particular communicative situation that they find themselves in. Naturally, this strategy will have a different effect in German or English translations, but the potentially estranging effect is usually domesticated by using footnotes or similar devices, turning literary linguistic strategies into seemingly concrete historical evidence and thereby avoiding the problem.

The literariness of Holocaust testimonies is an issue that has often been left unspoken in the discussion of these texts. Even the standard, genre-founding texts by Wiesel or Levi are literary, arising from and engaging with a particular literary culture, full of allusions to and reflections on literature, and characterised by forms of narrative experiment and linguistic self-reflection. In the case of Borowski, Andrzej Wirth confirms that only one of the Holocaust stories, '*U nas, w Auschwitzu*', contains any material that could be regarded as directly autobiographical and yet this is not mentioned in any discussion based on the English text.⁸

Translations will, almost inevitably, have to sacrifice some of the sense of a text engaging with its own literary culture, unless the reader is to be provided with academic apparatus for study purposes. This is the strategy employed in Giese's translation, which provides very detailed endnotes (although there has been some criticism of them, since they are translated directly from Borowski's own notes and not updated in the light of recent historical research).⁹ In contrast, Vedder works with occasional footnotes to

explain a point of information, but generally ignores the literary allusions, instead supporting the text's validity as a historical document. However, there is more at stake than this particular difficulty, and I want to suggest that in the concrete situation of translating a work of Holocaust literature, translation can entail a process of generic transformation. Translation can involve generic shifts between 'testimony', 'autobiography' and 'literature', which also involve publication and marketing strategies, the expectations created by the way in which texts are discussed, and the limits that are placed on that discussion. Borowski's text is being translated into a literary-philosophical context in which the Literary is seen as a treacherous category in discussion of Holocaust writing: it has shifted from 'literature' to 'testimony'.

Borowski's texts are about experiments with ways of writing, and about the education of a writer, about exploring and questioning form, genre, narrative and language. However, the reception of the translations and their publishing strategies tend to stress the experience of the Holocaust as one that dismisses literary questions in favour of a bald 'realism', as if this were an unproblematically defined mode of writing that gave unmediated access to reality. Historical knowledge about the Holocaust is brought to bear through notes and other apparatus as a guarantor – note an *extra-literary* guarantor – of the authenticity of this writing, indicating an anxiety about the freedom that a purely literary reading of the texts would allow. For example, American critical responses to the publication of Vedder tended to dismiss the literary as irrelevant or as a distraction: in the *Nation*, Mark Shechner described the stories as 'barely transformed autobiographical sketches [...] They are fiction only in a formal sense'.¹⁰ Irving Howe, writing in the *New Republic*, declared that the stories' authenticity rendered him 'all but indifferent to their status as art', preferring to stress their value as 'testimony'.¹¹

The German versions, however, both stress the literary nature of the texts, and both make use of the generic label *Erzählungen*. Although the paratextual apparatus of Griese is more concerned to establish the brutal clarity of Borowski's language, it is sometimes Cerny that renders his syntax most bluntly, without extra interpretation or explication. The contexts into which these translations are made are, however, quite different. Cerny is viewed by its interpreters as a work that '*Zeugnis abgibt*', and as stories which '*übersteigen mit ihrer geometrischen Progression des Grauens literarische Maßstäbe*'.¹²

<AQ1> Reactions to Griese on its publication in 2006 were, however, rather

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different. Ruth Klüger regretted that no biographical details were provided with the edition, thus leaving room for ill-informed speculation about the autobiographical nature of the text.¹³ Karol Sauerland suggests, relying on Borowski's correspondence, that one should read the stories as exercises in the manner of Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au But de la Nuit*, not only giving the texts an uncomfortable literary antecedent, but also stressing their status as literary experiments far removed from the idea of testimonial authenticity.¹⁴

It is my view that a comparison of these translations can show that what is considered to be the boundary between the 'authentic' and the 'literary' in Holocaust writing shifts and changes through time and between cultures. The way in which translators deal with certain of Borowski's literary strategies, along with the paratextual apparatus, attempt to make the texts useful for the moral-philosophical and literary context in which the Holocaust is discussed. In the case of Vedder, it is a context in which by the 1960s critical discussion is influenced by developing notions of testimonial authenticity, moral strictures against 'literariness' in Holocaust writing, and by a form of reading that searches texts for documentary evidence and material for ethical discussion. The reception of Borowski's text is clearly sited in a tradition stemming from Primo Levi's famous account of the ethical 'grey zone' in which victims become victimisers. The edition also strips away any stories that are not related directly to the camp experience, breaking up Borowski's original structures for his short story collections and omitting accounts of communist resistance activity in Warsaw, such as 'Pożegnanie z Marią', and other stories that set his Auschwitz stories in a specifically Polish cultural context, such as for example 'Bitwa pod Grunwaldem'. 'Auschwitz' thus becomes an isolated, decontextualised site of universal evil, rather than a specific location in occupied Poland, permitting it to be employed in the discussion of universal ethical concerns.

The German editions include a greater range of stories and work in different ways to Vedder and each other. In direct contrast with Vedder, the presentation of Cerny, the earlier edition, stresses the texts' literariness; Griesse however emphasises what the jacket's blurb calls Borowski's '*erbarmungslose Genauigkeit, die dem Leser nichts schenken will*'. However it is Cerny that often reflects more closely the awkward syntax of Borowski's narrator. The contrast in the presentation of these two texts seems to represent a changing view of the appropriateness of particular forms of language: the later edition creates its effect of authenticity in contrast with the earlier.

The titles of the editions also reflect these different concerns. The earlier German version, published by dtv, is entitled, *Die Steinerne Welt*, a title taken from one of Borowski's collections of stories (*Kamienny świat*). This is the only edition to accept Borowski's own choice of title for the collection of stories and to employ a poetic metaphor that does not refer directly to the Holocaust. The more recent edition, published by Schöffling, takes the provocative title of one of the stories, 'U nas, w Auschwitzu', as its volume title, *Bei uns in Auschwitz* (the story in question is an account of the narrator's pride in surviving the 'hard school' of Auschwitz-Birkenau in a way that allows him to lord it over other inmates). The edition is supported by quotations from Imre Kertész, taken from his 2002 Nobel Prize for Literature acceptance speech in which he describes reading Borowski as a way of finding documentary support for his confused memory of arriving at Auschwitz. Kertész's comments, on the back cover of the edition, stress Borowski's 'klare, selbstquälerisch gnadenlose Erzählungen', thus providing by extension a seal of approval for the translator's approach.¹⁵ The Penguin edition, with its Max Beckmann painting on the cover (a detail from *Bird's Hell*, 1938), takes its title from a story that stresses the grotesque work of the prisoners who unload the arriving trains, ushering many directly to their deaths, 'Proszę państwa do gazu' (*This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen; Bitte, die Herrschaften zum Gas*).

Borowski's texts present the life of the camp through the eyes of a non-Jewish prisoner who exploits his status for personal gain, while at the same time making pathos-filled statements about resistance and the need to establish a more humane future; the author leaves us to decide how to reconcile these two levels, and indeed to decide whether the narrator of each story should always be taken to be the same person. The narrator mostly avoids discussing his emotional state, even when describing the most inhumane treatment of prisoners, as in the story 'Proszę państwa do gazu' (*This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen; Bitte, die Herrschaften zum Gas*¹⁶), a harrowing account of the work of the men unloading the truckloads of arriving Jews. We hear about his feelings for the woman from whom he has been separated, his desire for revenge on other prisoners who have mistreated him, and his political views, but there is little language for the psychological effects of the extreme brutality that he witnesses and is complicit in. The translators deal with this in different ways, as I will show with a few examples of individual pairs.

The narrator describes the attitude of the new arrivals, who are not aware that they are likely to be sent straight to their deaths. In the Polish the

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narrator says of these new arrivals: *'psychicznie przygotowują się na ciężką walkę o byt'* (p.184) ('They prepare themselves psychically/psychologically for the hard struggle for life'). All of the translations expand the baldness of the Polish to a certain extent, but there are subtle distinctions in the interpretation of the inmates' psychology, from the viewpoint of the narrator. Cerny ignores the narrator's psychological interpretation entirely, while adding an intensifier to the 'struggle for life': *'sie schicken sich an, den harten Kampf ums nackte Dasein aufzunehmen'* (Cerny, p.101), while both Griese and Vedder suggest an emotional preparation that perhaps falsifies the narrator's distance from those he is observing, thereby allowing the reader an easier emotional identification:

'Sie stellen sich seelisch darauf ein, daß sie schwer um ihr Überleben kämpfen werdenmarden.' (Griese, p.219)

'They prepare themselves emotionally for the hard struggle ahead.' (Vedder, p.48)

Similarly, the translations tend to add intensifiers to the narrator's description of the removal of corpses from the trains, adding a level that anticipates the reader's reaction rather than conveying the narrator's stance:

Ludzie płyną i płyną, auta warczą jak rozjuszony psy. W oczach przesuwają się trupy wynoszone z wagonów, zdeptane dzieci, kaleki poukładane razem z trupami, i tłum, tłum, tłum. (p.177)

The people flow and flow, trucks growl like angry dogs. In [my] eyes corpses taken out of the wagons are removed, trampled children, cripples laid out/arranged together with corpses, and crowds, crowds, crowds.

Cerny conveys this most closely, though it makes the reflexive passive of *'przesuwają się'* into an active verb and dramatises the action of corpses being thrown onto a pile, rather than the more neutral expression of the Polish.

Immer mehr Menschen gehen vorüber, die Lastwagen knurren wie gebetzte Hunde. An meinen Augen ziehen die Leichen vorbei, die aus den Waggonen herausgetragen werden, die totgetrampelten Kinder, die Krippel, die man mit den Toten auf einen Haufen wirft. Und die Menge – die Menge. (Cerny, p.94)

Griese is similar:

Die Menschen strömen unaufhörlich, die Lastwagen knurren wie wütende Hunde.

Vor meinen Augen schieben sich die Leichen vorbei, die aus den Waggonen geholt werden, die totgetretenen Kinder, die Krüppel, die mit den Leichen auf einen Haufen geworfen werden, und die Menge, die Menge, die Menge... (Griese, p.208, Ellipses ellipses in original)

It is notable here that Griese makes the *'wütende Hunde'* into aggressors, while in Cerny, *'gehetzte Hunde'* seems to position them metaphorically as victims, which fits the situation less well. Vedder alters the emotional situation of the narrator, making clearer that we are to see him as 'traumatised' since he cannot help but see the terrible events, even with his eyes closed (which is clearly not the case in the Polish):

The morbid procession streams on and on – trucks growl like mad dogs. I shut my eyes tight, but I can still see corpses dragged from the train, trampled infants, cripples piled on top of the dead, wave after wave. (Vedder, p.41)

The 'procession' is here described as 'morbid', whereas Borowski's narrator avoids adjectives that imply a judgement or emotional involvement on the part of the narrator.

Similar interpretations can be found in the story *'Ludzie, którzy szli'* ('The People who Walked on'; *'Und sie gingen, Menschen, die gingen'*), which describes the activities of the privileged prisoners and takes place against a backdrop of a continual stream of people walking to the crematoria. [repetition of your own opening paragraph] Near the beginning of the story, the narrator describes a game of football, during which, in the space of a few minutes between corner kicks, hundreds of people vanish from the infamous ramp and are murdered. The narrator, playing in goal, has to fetch the ball from a position where he can see the ramp, and he notices that the ramp is empty when he bends down to pick up the ball: *'I podnosząc z ziemi znieruchomiałem: rampa była pusta.'* (p.78) ('And picking [it] up from the ground I froze: the ramp was empty.'). Griese renders the bald syntax more or less as it is: *'Als ich ihn [den Ball] aufhob, erstarrte ich: die Rampe war leer.'* (Griese, p.75). However, Cerny expands the statement, adding an extra action, thus implying that the narrator has deliberately looked over to see what is happening: *'Als ich ihn [den Ball] aufhob, sah ich noch einmal zur Rampe hinüber. Ich erstarrte. Die Rampe war leer.'* (Cerny, p.143). Vedder, however, continues the strategy of making the narrator interpret the emotional motivation of his actions: 'But as I reached down, I stopped in amazement – the ramp was empty.' (Vedder, p.83).

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The narrator continues by describing his reaction to the sights he sees as an absolute separation between observing consciousness and barely controllable physical symptoms; the key aspect here is that it is a physical reaction, described without reference to emotion, but as a power struggle between body and consciousness:

Patrzyłem w głąb nocy obojętnie, bez słowa, bez ruchu. Wewnątrz mnie całe ciało drgało i burzyło się bez mego udziału. Nie panowałem już nad nim, choć czułem każde jego drgnienie. Byłem zupełnie spokojny, ale ciało buntowało się. (p.79)

I looked into the depth of the night indifferent/numb, without a word, without a movement. Within me the whole body convulsed and revolted without my participation. I no longer controlled/ruled it, though I felt every spasm. I was completely calm, but the body rebelled.

The German versions both attempt to render this separation, but tend to weaken it in specific ways. Cerny does not register the fact that Borowski's narrator does not use a possessive pronoun, writing 'the body' instead of 'my body'. This is a normal grammatical possibility in Polish (as it is in German), whereas 'the body' would be marked in English; however, Borowski chooses this possibility deliberately, instead of writing '*moje ciało*', and emphasises the disjunction between body and consciousness through the seemingly illogical construction '*Wewnątrz mnie całe ciało drgało*' ('Within me the whole body convulsed'), which suggests the body's separateness or hostility. Cerny renders it like this:

Ich starrte in die dunkle Nacht, stumm, reglos. Alles in mir bebte und zitterte und zuckte – und ich konnte nichts tun. Mein Körper gehorchte mir nicht mehr, obwohl ich jede Zuckung spürte. Ich war vollkommen ruhig, aber mein Körper rebellierte. (Cerny, p.144)

This version seems to link the body and consciousness together as parts of the same organism ('*Alles in mir kochte...*', '*mein Körper...*'), and alters the idea that the body is reacting without the narrator's participation by adding a feeling of helplessness ('*Ich konnte nichts tun*') that is absent from the Polish.

Griese renders the neutrality of the word '*patrzyłem*' (I looked) more effectively than Cerny's '*starrte*': Borowski's translators tend to dramatise key terms to do with watching, missing the distancing effect of neutral terms used to describe the witnessing of terrible events. Griese also attempts to

render the conflict between body and consciousness by using the German impersonal 'es' to imply involuntary actions, and by translating 'bez mego udziału³' as 'ohne mein Zutun', stressing that there is no interaction between them:

Ich blickte in die Nacht hinaus, betäubt, wortlos, reglos. In meinem Körper bebte es und kochte es, ohne mein Zutun. Ich hatte keinen Einfluss auf ihn, doch spürte ich jede Zuckung. Ich war vollkommen ruhig, aber der Körper rebellierte. (Griese, p.76)

This phrase 'ich hatte keinen Einfluss auf ihn' does, however, weaken the sense of a power struggle that has been lost.

Vedder continues to have the narrator interpret his own emotional state for the reader:

I stared into the night, numb, speechless, frozen with horror. My entire body trembled and rebelled, somehow even without my participation. I no longer controlled my body, although I could feel its every tremor. My mind was completely calm, only the body seemed to rebel. (Vedder, p.85)

Where the Polish suggests – without being explicit – that the body has simply taken control of the narrator's movements, this version provides an emotional explanation ('horror') that establishes a link between body and consciousness that Borowski's narrator does not. The Polish version does not tell us directly about the narrator's emotional state, but describes an observing stance and a set of physical reactions: if the reader wants to see the physical reactions as *symptoms*, then he/she has to make the causal connection.

The word 'horror' is a significant feature of Vedder, used to render a number of different Polish constructions, including many in which no such dramatic noun exists. For example, the phrase 'odrzuć przerażenie i wstręt i pogardę' (p.45) ('discard/reject terror and disgust and disdain'), is rendered accurately as 'discarding your sense of horror and loathing and contempt' (Vedder, p.122). However, the use of 'horror' here, rather than a noun that describes fear, fits a pattern in Vedder, in which disparate expressions and situations are linked using this word. For example, where the Polish has:

W obozie było 'coraz lepiej'. Po trzech czy czterech latach nikt nie wierzył, że

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mogłoby być po dawnemu, i był dumny, że przeżył. (p.86)

In the camp it was 'better and better'. After three or four years nobody believed that it could be as before, and was proud that he had survived.

Vedder has:

Life in the camp became 'better and better' all the time – after the first three or four years. We felt certain that the horrors could never again be repeated, and we were proud that we had survived. (Vedder, p.92)

As well as inserting an interpretation ('horrors') which is only hinted at in the first version, this version changes the emphasis of the phrase 'three or four years'. In Vedder, the stress is on the length of time in which the 'horrors' were experienced, whereas it had previously emphasised the distance between 'now' and 'then'.

Similarly, Tadek's pride in surviving the 'hard school' of Auschwitz-Birkenau is intensified by the addition of the word 'horror':

A ci ludzie ... Widzisz, oni przeszli straszną szkołę obozu. (p.36, ellipses in original)

But these people ... You see, they have been through/undergone the terrible school of the camp.

But the people here ... you see, they have lived through and survived all the incredible horrors of the concentration camp (Vedder, p.103)

A passage near the end of '*U nas, w Auschwitzu*' provides a clue to the significance of this particular translation strategy. Tadek discusses news he has just received of the deaths of friends outside the camp, and realises that it is not just in the camp that death and meaninglessness dominate: he no longer even has the consolation that he and his companions are the last of their kind, and that the world outside could be better:

Myslałem, Że na nas się skończy. Że, jak wrócimy, wrócimy do świata, który nie zaznał tej okropnej atmosfery dławiącej nas. (p.71)

I thought that it would finish with us. That, when we returned, we would return to a world that did not know this terrible atmosphere that is choking us. (my translation) <AQ2>

And I had thought that all this would be limited to us. That when we return, we should be returning to a world which would not have known the horrors and the atmosphere that are killing us. (Vedder, p.138)

By once more inserting the key notion of horror, Vedder emphasises the text's role as a *witness* to the horrors of the death camps: Tadek will carry the horrors with him when he leaves, into a better world, but one that will not understand. This intention is made more explicit in another passage in the same story, in which Tadek anticipates his fiancée's shocked reaction to the contents of the letter (that is, the story itself) that he has smuggled into the *Frauenlager* to her:

Ale przecież i o tych sprawach, które się dzieją wokół nas, możemy mówić. Nie wynołujemy zła na próżno i nieodpowiedzialnie, przecież tkwimy w nim - - (p.47)

But still we are able to talk even about those matters that are happening around us. We do not call forth evil in vain or irresponsibly, after all we are caught in it

Vedder puts it this way:

But I think we should speak about all the things that are happening around us. We are not invoking evil irresponsibly or in vain, for we have now become a part of it... (Vedder, p.113)

There is a clear distinction in the choice of modal verb: the Polish, as can be seen in my own translation, implies possibility, while Vedder implies obligation. Also, the work 'speak', which is a possible translation of 'mówi?', has a more formal implication than 'talk about' in English: one speaks of or about matters of earnest significance that have to be 'spoken of'. Both are possible translations here, but the verb 'speak' has raised the level of formality, in line with the notion of the obligation of witness. Additionally, Vedder tweaks the punctuation and paragraph layout in a way that changes the emphasis. In Polish the paragraph starts with ellipses and ends with a dash, indicating that it has been written when the narrator returns to the letter after a break; the following paragraph starts with a lower case letter, emphasising perhaps the hurried process of composition. Vedder removes all of this extra punctuation, except that it replaces the dash at the end of the paragraph with ellipses: the effect is different here, suggesting that this is a thought that tails off into the inexpressible, or that it should be read as a key statement.¹⁷

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The German versions operate with different ways of conveying the idea of permission, rather than simply ability: Cerny has '*Aber man kann doch reden über das, was um uns herum geschieht*' (Cerny, p.116), while Giese has '*aber wir dürfen doch auch über die Dinge sprechen, die sich rings um uns ereignen*'. (Giese, p.33). Cerny conveys the bluntness of the statement better, as well as the fact that, on one level, Tadek's words are simply addressed to his fiancée, assuring her that their relationship is so close that they can talk about anything. In the other cases, the explication necessary to convey the possibilities inherent in '*možemy mōvić*' has led to the translator, particularly in Vedder, lifting the passage out of its narrative context and transforming it into a statement about the moral obligation to bear witness.

What this change misses is the fact that the story, '*U nas, w Auschwitzu*', like many of Borowski's Auschwitz stories, is about literary possibilities, form, language and their adequacy to the situation: Borowski does not use here the language of moral obligation, nor that of bearing witness. Of course, this is part of the motivation for writing, but the texts themselves are not structured around the language of obligation, witness and authenticity in the way of, say, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi. Borowski explores ways of writing about the experience of Auschwitz: for him, writing is possible, and it is a question of finding adequate means. In '*U nas, w Auschwitzu*', for example, a number of events, philosophical discussions and moral anecdotes are reported and juxtaposed within the structure of a letter in which a young man tries to impress his fiancée.

The experimental nature of the text is hinted at at the beginning of the story, when the narrator is addressed by the *Lagerarzt*, who has selected him for training as a medical orderly:

[Lagerarzt] spytał się jeszcze każdego z nas o wiek i zawód, a gdy odpowiedziałem mu:

- Student.

Podniósł ze zdziwieniem brwi:

Cóż pan studiował

Historię literatury – odrzekłem skromnie.

Kiwnął ze zniechęceniem głową, wszedł do samochodu i odjechał.

Później szliśmy bardzo piękną drogą do Oświęcimia, widzieliśmy kupa krajobrazu [...] (p.31f)

The Lagerarzt then inquired from each of us about our age and profession, and when I answered him:

- Student.

He raised his eyebrows in astonishment:

- What were you studying?

- The history of literature – I answered modestly.

He nodded with discouragement, got into the car and drove away.

Then we walked a very pretty road to O?wi?cim, saw a load of landscape [...]¹⁸

The irony of this passage arises from the doctor's discouraging response to the narrator's studies, and from the fact that a student of literature (and aspiring writer) writes so poorly and awkwardly about the landscape: '*kaup? krajobrazu*' is literally 'a heap/pile of landscape' and is used colloquially in the sense of 'a load of'. Coming at the beginning of the story, this is a key to understanding the text's narrative strategies: the narrator's subject of study draws attention to the fact that this is a text about literature, and the comment about the landscape makes us aware of the narrator's limitations. Once more the different strategies adopted by the translations are interesting. Cerny smoothes over the problem – '*Dann marschierten wir auf einer sehr schönen Straße nach Auschwitz, sahen das weite Land*' (Cerny, p.103) – as does Vedder, though the word 'interesting' seems to hint at some irony: 'Afterwards we marched to Auschwitz along a very beautiful road, observing some very interesting scenery en route.' (Vedder, p.93). It is Griesse that comes the closest to conveying the awkwardness of the statement: '*Wir gingen dann auf einem sehr schönen Weg nach Auschwitz, sahen eine Menge Landschaft*' (Griesse, p.14). In addition, it does not assume that '*szli?my*' (we walked) must imply marching, leaving intact a potential reading of the passage as an idyllic stroll, and refusing to provide contextualising information for the reader.

Vedder also evades the issue of the text's self-referential literariness by translating '*historię literatury*' as 'the history of art' (Vedder, p.99), making it easier for the reader to avoid the confrontation of aesthetic concerns with 'Auschwitz' – which is often figured as uncomfortable or inappropriate – and to read the texts as testimony.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates how all three published translations position Borowski's texts within a contested, and culturally specific, field of ideas about the relationship of literature, autobiography and testimony. I have

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identified three particular strategies that play a role here: firstly, the smoothing over of certain features of Borowski's narrative which emphasise the text's literariness; secondly, the way the translated texts are positioned within a reception context that expects a language of moral obligation to bear witness; and thirdly, a psychologising approach to the characterisation of the narrator that seems to reflect an unwillingness to accept the full consequences of Borowski's narrative strategies.

Vedder has used these strategies most consistently, turning Borowski's Auschwitz into a contextless site of ultimate evil, to which survivors' voices bear witness. The extremity of the disjunction between mind and body that characterises Borowski's narrator is bridged through the addition of interpretations of the narrator's emotional and psychological state, and through the consistent use of vocabulary ('horror') that is expected in discussions of 'Auschwitz' as a symbolic location: the 'obligatory horrors' of my title, that dovetail with the expectation of what an 'authentic' Holocaust narrative should contain. Vedder permits the reader a certain amount of identification with the narrator, and offers the possibility of an interpretation using critical categories of trauma, witness and authenticity: in fact, this translation participates in the development of this critical (and marketing) discourse, encouraging a particular view of Borowski that supports it. By contrast, the German versions are both concerned to stress the literary nature of the texts, both making use of the generic label '*Erzählungen*'. Although the paratextual apparatus of Griesse is concerned to establish the brutal clarity of Borowski's language, it is sometimes Cerny that renders his syntax most bluntly, without extra interpretation or explication. However, Borowski's work shifted in its German reception from autobiographical testimony to literature, indicating perhaps that the discussion of genre boundaries in texts about the Holocaust is still a matter of some anxiety.

This comparative study of translations of Borowski's texts reveals something significant about the translation strategies, namely that the effect of authenticity created by a text about the Holocaust will depend on the way in which the translation and editorial practice makes the text comprehensible within the expectations of the target culture. Any critical discussion that genuinely wishes to get to deal effectively with texts by the victims of the Holocaust needs to make the work of the translator more, not less, visible, and to overcome the anxiety about authenticity that discussion of translation inevitably brings with it.

NOTES

1. Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, selected and trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin, 1967). This essay will use the paperback edition with an introduction by Jan Kott (New York, Penguin, 1976), which will be referred to in the text as Vedder. When quoting the translations, I have kept the punctuation marks employed in the text, since this is an issue that I discuss below.
2. Tadeusz Borowski, *Die steinerne Welt: Erzählungen*, trans. Vera Cerny, with a 'Nachwort' by Andrzej Wirth (Munich: Piper, 1963, paperback edn Munich: dtv, 1970). This essay will use the 1970 edition, referred to as Cerny. This edition appeared in a 4th edition as late as 1999, but under the new title *Bei uns in Auschwitz* (Munich: Piper, 1999), indicating perhaps a desire for a bolder, more shocking approach in marketing the text. This edition should not be confused with the very different edition with the same title by Friedrich Giese, which I also discuss in this essay.
3. Tadeusz Borowski, *Bei uns in Auschwitz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Schöffling, 2006). This edition will be referred to as Giese.
4. Tadeusz Borowski, 'Ludzie, którzy szli', *Pisma w czterech tomach*, ed. Tadeusz Drewnowski, Justyna Szczesna and Sławomir Buryła (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2004), 4 vols, I: *Proza I*, ed. Sławomir Buryła, pp. 77–91 (p. 81). This edition will be referred to as P. <AQ3> My word-for-word translations of P are designed to convey literal meaning and to reflect where possible the syntax of the original. Two of the stories discussed here ('U nas, w Auschwitzu' and 'Ludzie, którzy szli', were originally published in 1946 in a collection entitled *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu* (Warsaw: Oficyna Warszawska, 1946), along with more concretely autobiographical pieces by fellow survivors Janusz Nel Siedlecki and Krystyn Olszewski: an English edition of this work was published in 2000: *We Were in Auschwitz* (New York: Welcome Rain, 2000). This edition was translated by Alicia Nitecki, except for the stories by Borowski, which are reprints of Vedder's 1960s translation: the edition also adds Vedder's versions of Borowski's stories 'A Day at Harmenz' and 'This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen!' In this edition, the stories are clearly treated as autobiographical, historical documents. For fuller details of the publication history of Borowski's works, see the commentary by Tadeusz Drewnowski and Sławomir Buryła, in *Proza I*, pp. 405–29. I would like to thank Dr Dorota Ostrowska for her invaluable help with Borowski's Polish: any errors and inadequacies in my translations are, of course, entirely my responsibility.
5. Although they differ greatly the English and the earlier German versions were made from the same 1959 edition of Borowski's works: Tadeusz Borowski, *Wybor opowiadań* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1959). All Polish textual extracts have been checked against this edition for consistency, but reference is made here to the currently available four-volume edition of Borowski's works.
6. Piotr Kuhiwczak, 'The Grammar of Survival: How do We Read Holocaust Testimonies?', in Myriam Salama-Carr (ed.), *Translating and Interpreting Conflict* (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 61–74 (p. 68).
7. A significant example is the publication of Primo Levi's letter to the German translator of *Se questo è un uomo*, Heinz Riedt, at the beginning of the German edition of the work. The German edition adds to the title the generic descriptor, *Ein autobiographischer Bericht*, which is absent in the Italian.
8. Andrzej Wirth, 'Die unvollständige Rechnung des Tadeusz Borowski. Nachwort', in *Die steinerne Welt*, pp. 203–10 (p. 207). <AQ4>
9. See Karol Sauerland, 'Tadeusz Borowski, Céline und die Rezensenten', Newsletter of the Fritz-Bauer-Institut 31, p. 18.
10. Mark Shechner, 'Survival Declined', *The Nation*, 19 June 1976.
11. Irving Howe, 'Writing and the Holocaust', *The New Republic*, 27 October 1986.
12. Wirth, 'Die unvollständige Rechnung des Tadeusz Borowski. Nachwort', p. 209; Review in *Der Spiegel*, Vol.32/ (1963), p.69.

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13. Ruth Klüger, 'Trauer um die Toten, aussichtsloses Überleben', *Literaturen*, Vol.10/ (2006), p.52.
14. Sauerland, 'Tadeusz Borowski, Céline und die Rezensenten', p. 14.
15. See Imre Kertész, 'Heureka! Rede zum Nobelpreis für Literatur 2002', trans. Kristin Schwamm, in *Die exilierte Sprache: Essays und Reden* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), pp. 243–44 (p. 250).
16. Both Vedder and Cerny add an exclamation mark to Borowski's title.
17. Vedder certainly has a tendency to add ellipses where there are none in P, which has had consequences for interpretation. Borowski's is not an 'art of ellipses' or of the 'inexpressible', but one about the possibility of speaking.
18. Note that the doctor uses the formal form of address in Polish, implying its use in the German he is speaking.